

The Builder.

No. CCCCLXXVII.

SATURDAY, MARCH 27, 1852.

IN the present number of our journal, we give a view of the addition about to be made on the west side of Somerset House, in completion of the original design.*

Somerset House, as we now see it, the work of Sir William Chambers, was commenced in 1776, and was in progress more than fourteen years, since, it appears by a report laid before Parliament in 1790, that 334,703*l.* had been then expended, and that an additional sum of 33,500*l.* was still wanting to complete the building. According to Mr. Brayley, in "Britton's Public Buildings of London," which contains a plan and five views of the structure, full half a million of money was ultimately expended upon it, and it was then left unfinished. The whole of the accounts, we may mention, have recently turned up, and will probably afford matter for publication.

That Chambers was not more correct in his judgment as to the probable cost of the work than some architects of modern days, is proved by the circumstance that, in a report presented by him to the House of Commons, he said he thought, though there were difficulties which prevented accurate computation, that the cost certainly would not exceed 250,000*l.* What do we now care whether it cost a quarter of a million or half a million; and how much does the question affect the opinion we form of the building and its designer? Nothing. Nor will any ask a century hence, when contemplating some of the buildings "run up" in our time (if they last so long), what *these* cost, or find in the small outlay, if they should ask, any reason for withholding condemnation. Prudence and circumstances must, of course, regulate expenditure. If we must have a building for a particular purpose, and have only a certain sum of money, the building must necessarily be just what we can get for that money. But those who build for the approbation of posterity must care nothing about the outlay: they must do their best so far as they go, and leave those who come after to finish it. Posterity will not ask, What did it cost?

The first Somerset House had its name from its founder, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, known as the Protector. It was commenced about 1548, and was not finished in 1553, when he lost his head, partly because he had built sumptuous houses, "leaving the King's poorer soldiers unpaid of their wages." The design of the building has been attributed to John of Padua, described in the time of Henry VIII. as "Deviser of His Majesty's Buildings." In a folio of designs by John Thorpe, now in the Soane Museum, the first drawing is a ground plan of old Somerset House; but in what way Thorpe was connected with the building (if at all) does not appear.

After the attainder of the Protector, Somerset House devolved to the Crown, and

was made the residence of some of our queens. Anne of Denmark and her ladies appear to have had much fun there, appearing "like so many sea nymphs or nereides." The queen of Charles I. made it the head quarters of Roman Catholicism, and established there a convent of Capuchin friars. In 1642 the Parliament ordered "the images and monuments of idolatry in the chapel there to be demolished," and the friars to be sent into France. Here died Inigo Jones; and during the occupation of the building by the wife of Charles II. it became the reputed scene of the mysterious murder of Sir Edmund-Bury Godfrey. In 1775 "Buckingham House" was settled on Queen Charlotte in lieu of Somerset House; and under an Act of Parliament the latter structure was taken down, and the present building erected to contain certain public offices.

When we say that Somerset House is one of the finest structures of which the metropolis can boast, we scarcely give it the precedence it deserves. The admirable proportions and excellent details of the Strand front, the elegance of the open vestibule leading into the noble court-yard around which the offices are placed, the internal distribution, the river front, though not without objectionable points, and the decoration of the interior, have obtained for the architect the praise of those best qualified to judge. As a piece of masonry, it is unrivalled: the masks of river deities on the key-stones of the arches, by Carlini and Wilton, are admirably executed.

Of course it was abused at the time. One Williams, under the name of Anthony Pasquin, published a clever but wholly disingenuous attack on the building, which is partly reprinted in Mr. Joseph Gwilt's admirable edition of Chambers's "Treatise on Civil Architecture," known to all our professional readers; at all events it ought to be. The soundness of the charges may be judged of by two or three paragraphs. He says:—

"This surprising, stupendous, and extraordinary heap of stones was called into order by the magic voice of that pine-apple of knight-hood, Sir William Chambers, at the command of the great and sapient council of this realm in 1774. It occupies a space of 500 feet in depth and 800 feet in width, and is altogether a most astonishing assemblage of contradictory objects. The entrance, or atrium, is so unappreciated that it looks like the narrow mouth of economy, through which we grope our passage to the vast stomach of national ruin. The arcade is borrowed from the *strada della dora grossa*, at Turin."

"There is an unfortunate allusion to royalty. The entablatures of this vestibule are covered with cyphers, emblematic and appertaining to the King, Queen, and Prince of Wales. Surely no true subject can approve of annexing the characters of cyphers to such august personages! If there is any novelty or genius evident in this sportiveness of fancy, it is so thoroughly republican and indecent, that it should immediately be effaced."

And again—

"The names of the sculptors who were employed in the decoration of the exterior, are Carlini, Wilton, Geraci, Nolletkens, and Bacon. I have chronicled them as sculptors, not statuaries, as neither appears to have cut a figure in this business!"

The smartness of the *jesu d'esprit* has saved it from the oblivion it deserved.

The east wing of Somerset House was left incomplete by Chambers; but in 1829 the vacant space was filled up from the designs of Sir Robert Smirke with the buildings for King's College. The west side, or that next Wellington-street, has remained unfinished till now, flanked by some ungainly brick dwelling-

houses, springing out of a deep pit. In consequence of the consolidation of the Boards of Excise, Stamps and Taxes, &c. into one Board (the Island Revenue), it became necessary to abandon the Excise Office, in Broad-street, City, and bring all the establishment under one roof at Somerset House; and Mr. James Pennethorne, the architect to the Board of Works, was directed to make designs for the completion. By the alteration proposed, a large annual saving will be effected, and the cost of the new buildings will be met by the sale of the old Excise Office, so that no expense, we understand, will be incurred by the public for the completion of this side of Somerset House.

The whole extent of the new front is 300 feet. At the south end the new building is kept about 25 feet behind the river front, so that the uniformity of that front may not be interfered with. All the details are to be copied *exactly* from existing parts of Somerset House; but the centre portion of the new front (which will not be seen from any point of view at the same time with the river front) has an attic, and the chamber-windows are heightened, to meet internal requirements.

The sculptures, we are informed, will be placed in the hands of a first-rate man.

The north wing projects about 55 feet; the south wing about 48 feet; and there is a want of squareness in the arrangement of them produced by an adherence to the line of street (if the plan now before us be correct), the probable ill effect of which may be usefully reconsidered by the able architect engaged. It has been stated in some of the newspapers that in consequence of certain arrangements made by the present administration, the proposed addition will not be proceeded with. We cannot learn, however, that there is any reason to suppose that this is correct. Tenders for the execution of the south wing will be received this week, and others for the remainder of the building will speedily follow.

OF THE MAINTENANCE AND RESTORATION OF ANCIENT MONUMENTS,

MORE PARTICULARLY IN REFERENCE TO THE ROYAL TOMBS IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY.

THE reparation of public monuments is a question mixed up with a variety of feelings of the highest importance, and influenced by deep-rooted prejudices, which, however, are entitled to our respect and consideration. It therefore becomes a subject deserving to be fully and dispassionately analysed, in order that we may be able to appreciate its bearings under every point of view.

There is a class of the lovers of antiquity,—earnest, deep, and true—who think that as there is a pedantry in literature, so there may be also a pedantry in archaeology and picturesqueness; and to whom it appears that, in all this strife of antiquarian and artistic opinion, one great leading, it might be said, conclusive, consideration, is entirely lost sight of, namely, the intention of the royal founders of these tombs. They would ask, what was the original aim and object of the erectors of these memorials of departed worth? Was it not to hand down the memory of the virtues and other qualities of the deceased; to bring vividly before the people of each successive age the remembrance of former glory? A lesson to posterity, a testimony of pious duty? Was it for perpetuity or for a century or two? If the latter, why were they so liberally and munificently endowed for their maintenance and religious observances? We must all admit the object of the royal founders to have been this, that the monuments should be maintained. Have we a right by neglect to permit this intention to lapse? We have not inherited these memo-

* See page 201.